

Editing: Triage

By Azalea Dabill

I use Sol Stein's editing method of triage, where you address the larger, messier issues of your manuscript first. Issues like story arc, content, plot structure, and plot and character threads: any big problem that might take some of your little problems with it to oblivion. Some people I have talked to advocate going from smaller grammar problems to the larger story, plot, or chapter problems. I think it might depend on whether you are teaching or mentoring a new writer, or straight editing.

And are you learning how to write as you go along? I learned this way, and in my first drafts I went after grammar. I was blessed that when I had my manuscript together I had to cut only one chapter. (So far.) I deleted and fixed grammar boo-boos in that chapter, time I could have saved.

For a writer who knows how to use the smaller tools to make up the whole, I believe it is easier to fix large problems first, eliminating many small fixes you could make now, but would simply end up cutting later. Wasted effort is not something I want to get into. And I don't think you do.

But try both methods: pursue what works best for you. Best as in "works best," not just "feels easiest." Taking shortcuts because it's too much work, or because you fear what you might have to change, won't work in your favor. Excellence is our goal! And the goal of publishers. Write on!

See Sol Stein's Stein on Writing for a deep treatment of his triage editing method.

In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.